

Belonging

Below is the text of the Sermon from January 20th 2013.

1. As a small group, consider the words of Jesus from the Bible passage. Talk about where you notice sinking sand in your life and experience.
2. Consider the two quotes related to “Identity” and “Jesus Only”. Spend time dwelling in each quote and discussing your responses.
3. Talk about how you may view your life differently as a result of the thoughts expressed through the sermon.
4. There is an excellent seminar that you may like to view either as a group or individually and discuss. This seminar will help you to go beyond the sermon into the territory of what naturally flows out of a life that is built on the solid rock of Christ. Anne Morrisy: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPg5jj7OYGGQ>. “What’s the good of faith in our neighbourhoods?”

Luke 6:46-49

The Message (MSG)

⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷ “Why are you so polite with me, always saying ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘That’s right, sir,’ but never doing a thing I tell you? These words I speak to you are not mere additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundation words, words to build a life on.

⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹ “If you work the words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who dug deep and laid the foundation of his house on bedrock. When the river burst its banks and crashed against the house, nothing could shake it; it was built to last. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a dumb carpenter who built a house but skipped the foundation. When the swollen river came crashing in, it collapsed like a house of cards. It was a total loss.”

Why this passage of Scripture?

The danger of this message is that it could have easily become a session in pop-psychology. There’s a lot of influences out there in our culture about what it means to belong, how we belong. There are a billion options about who we can belong to. At any point in time, a theory of belonging makes sense, but such is the social-turbulence of our age that the very notion of belonging is constantly changing. All types of relationships are subject to fragmentation: I’m talking about marriage, family, friends, work, church ...

It just occurred to me recently how fragmented life had become for my own family. No-body deliberately set out to do this, but what’s interesting is to look back and see that both Neil and I enjoyed the benefit of a large extended family of grandparents,

aunts, uncles, cousins ... we grew up in a family of the good, the bad and the ugly but where there was a sense of belongingness regardless and in spite of.

Within our own lifetimes, both families are totally fragmented. Both conscious and unconscious decisions made by each individual in our family have resulted in fragmentation away from what we all once belonged to. We've just had our first Christmas without any connection to Neil's family apart from his mum. I wouldn't recognise my own cousins if I fell over them let alone even know who their children are.

Its important to recognise that no-one is to blame here ... but the consequences of this fragmentation are just sad ... my children have not had the rich benefit of belonging to a large family where everyone was included for no other reason than they were related by blood. My children grew up without the benefit of observing the good, the bad and the ugly of life within their own family ... they are the poorer for that experience.

That's just one example of the kind of fragmentation that we are all living within. Whether its family, church, friends, work, sports ... any kind of relationship that we may have is subject to social fragmenting influences. Just think about how much Facebook has changed the way we relate and belong ... in a relatively short period of time, its totally redefined the way people understand what it means to belong.

As I pondered these things, I realised that all of the ground on which I was trying to build a message on belongingness was like standing on shifting sand. That was the "A-ha" moment as the words of Jesus came to mind ... we build our lives, our sense of belonging on anything other than Jesus and we find ourselves on constantly sinking sand.

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What does it mean to build our sense of belonging on Jesus?

1. Belonging – Identity

Regardless of who we are or what kind of personality type we are, all of us have an internal drive or an internal need to belong to someone or something. Psychologists tell us that we can only understand who we are as a person in relation to others in our community. We derive our sense of identity and belonging through others.

1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."

Proverbs 12:26 (ESV)

The righteous chooses his friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

“As our theologians remind us, creation occurred “ex nihilo”, or out of nothingness. This means that all things, even the dust with which humanity was created, derive their existence from God. So when we seek a different identity derived from anything other than God, we don’t actually become different but only return to the nothingness we were before God created our lives.

The truth is that if God is not creating our lives, then those around us are ... There is no such thing as a self-constructed life. There is only being in Christ or there is the nothingness that others create for us.” M Craig Barnes, “The Pastor as Minor Poet”

Is nothingness too harsh? When you think about it ... he’s right. Anything that is not of God, anything that is not eternal will not last.

Do we really want to have an identity that changes constantly with the passing fads and seasons? Identity that is never at rest or peace ... heart that is never at rest or peace.

Pause for reflection ...

Young people ... you may not understand what I’m talking about. There is a sense in which you can’t understand what I’m talking about – you’ve not yet had enough life experience do grasp the deep truth here. But you can be wise at any age ... be careful with how and who and what you build your sense of identity on. Listen to the wisdom of God’s Word and the Wisdom of people who have lived enough life to be able to testify to the truth of God’s wisdom.

We build our lives, our sense of belonging, our sense of identity on anything other than Jesus and we find ourselves on constantly sinking sand.

2. Jesus Only

Second observation about identity ...

The turbulent social times in which we live are a gift to us from God. Why do I think that?

As I look at the pressures that churches are facing, the threat of irrelevance that will lead to the closure of many more churches before its done, I and others see a great opportunity from the hand of God. The sheer pressure of cultural change is helping us to see where the world has shaped the identity of the church than Christ has. It’s helping us to see what about our faith is eternal and what is not.

One writer puts it this way ...

We are ... reclaiming a faith where belief is not quite the same thing as an answer, where behaviour is not a list of dos and don’ts, and where belonging to Christian community is less like joining an exclusive club and more or a relationship with God and others. (We are reclaiming a faith that)... is never satisfied with old answers, codified dogmas, institutionalised practices, or invested power. (We are reclaiming a faith that calls us to) ... return to the basic questions of believing, behaving and

belonging – and explore each anew with an open heart. Dianna Butler Bass,
“Christianity After Religion”

She goes on to talk about the difference between two words that we attach to Jesus.
The word “And” and the word “In”.

Luke 6:46-49

The Message (MSG)

⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷ “Why are you so polite with me, always saying ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘That’s right, sir,’ but never doing a thing I tell you? These words I speak to you are not mere additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundation words, words to build a life on.

Our human nature pushes us towards living out our faith in Christ with the word “And”. We believe in Jesus, AND we go to church. We believe in Jesus AND there are things we do and don’t do. We believe in Jesus AND we need to join a small group. We believe in Jesus AND we need to give and serve. We believe in Jesus AND we need to read and pray every day ...

It’s exhausting. It’s like constantly being preoccupied with the renovations that you are doing on your house. You never finish renovating ... its another example of sinking sand.

If you are feeling like that right now, then you can know that you are living with the Jesus AND syndrome. It’s not life, its not freedom, it’s not joy and it’s not rest and peace. Those feelings are a gift to you to help you to recognise what’s going on and make a shift from AND to In ...

I want to invite you to join me in an experiment for the next week. As many times as you can this week, remind yourself that you are IN Christ and that Christ is IN you. Notice any differences that you experience as you think about living your life in Christ rather than AND with Christ.

We build our lives, our sense of belonging, our sense of identity on anything other than IN Jesus and we will find ourselves on constantly sinking sand.

Some of you older people, like me, may have the words of a wonderful hymn come to mind as I’ve been speaking this morning.

This hymn echoes with the wisdom of the ages ...

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. The chorus:
On Christ the Solid rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand.

In the first stanza, hardly a clearer statement of total dependence on Christ could be made. Mote recognizes that our hope for eternal life depends completely upon Jesus' righteousness, not on some sweet earthly frame. Nothing in this hymn ever hints that any work on our part can add to Christ's work in order to secure our eternal salvation. However, the hymn is not ignorant of the reality of our daily struggles. In the second and third stanzas, Mote recognizes that there are times when the doubts, cares, and darkness of this world will seem to weaken our fellowship with God and veil His face from us. Even in these times, when "all around [our] soul gives way," God has not left us. Our anchor of faith can still hold in the darkness, knowing through faith that even though not seen (Heb 11:1), He still sustains us. It is at these times that it is most important, in Mote's words, to "rest on His unchanging grace." It is the immutable, certain promise of God unto salvation that allows us to have assurance even in times of great spiritual darkness. Unlike those who spend times of spiritual struggle doubting their very salvation, those who adhere to the tenets expounded from Scripture by GES rest, with Mote, in the firm knowledge of our destiny.

From a declaration of God's grace in the first stanza, to the application of that grace in times of trouble in the second and third stanzas, the writer brings his hymn full circle in the final stanza, with the ultimate realization of God's grace.

Interestingly, there seems to be some discrepancy surrounding the verses of this hymn. In addition to the four commonly sung verses printed above, Mote composed two others. One source lists (one of the missing verses) ...

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
'Midst all the hell I feel within,
On His completed work I lean.*

<http://www.faithalone.org/journal/1998i/Ward.html> Article by Keith Ward

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Benediction:

*As you leave this place
may the Living Lord go with you;
May he go behind you, to encourage you,
beside you, to befriend you,
above you, to watch over you,
beneath you, to lift you from your sorrows,
within you, to give you the gifts of faith, hope, and love,
and always before you, to show you the way.*